

The Representation of National Identity in the Film *Tanah Surga Katanya...*

Liem Satya Limanta

Faculty of Humanities, University of Indonesia

Email: satya@petra.ac.id

Lilawati Kurnia

Faculty of Humanities, University of Indonesia

Email: purplemoon08@gmail.com

Abstract:

Identity is central in people's life to steer their life. However, it is not something that is fixed and solid. As Hall said it was more of a process than a product or a fixed entity. National identity is a more sophisticated construction that involves a positioning. It becomes more complicated if it concerns those who live on the border area. Drawing on the concepts from Anderson, Hall, Kolakowski, Smith, and Edensor on identity, national identity, and representation, this paper will analyze how national identity is represented in the film *Tanah Surga Katanya...* From the analysis it can be concluded that the representation of national identity in the film, which is carried out through the usage of symbols (flag and currency), memory and rituals, the film *Tanah Surga Katanya...* has been successful in showing that people who live on the borderland may have multiple and competing national identities and that national identity is a construction that cannot be solidified into a single meaning.

Keywords: national identity, representation, construction, contestation of meaning

Everybody needs an identity. It gives a security for someone to play out his/her role. Without identity, confusion will be the consequence. However, identity is not something that is fixed and easy to determine. As Hall (1990) said that identity is a production, not a product, which is “never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (as cited in Rutherford, p. 222). The key point of this identity construction within representation is *positioning*. Hence, according to Hall, there is always “a politics of identity, a politics of position” (p. 226). Identity is so important since, as Castells (2010) defines it, it is “people's source of meaning and experience” (p. 6). By this definition, identity gives a sense of direction of people's behavior and an orientation of their values. Furthermore, in line with Hall's idea, Castells sees identity as “the process of construction of meaning”

(ibid.). Thus, identity is always constructed in a certain social context. This paper will analyze how national identity, namely what it means to be Indonesians, is represented by the characters in the film *Tanah Surga Katanya...*(2012) and what struggles they experience in positioning themselves as Indonesians.

The Context of the Film

This film was produced in 2012 and won five awards in the Indonesian Film Festival 2012, namely the best film, the best director, the best original screenplay, the best supporting actor, and the best art direction (Siregar, 2012). It tells a story of an ex-volunteer-fighter of 1965 Indonesia-Malaysia confrontation, Hasyim, who lived in the border of West Kalimantan (Indonesia) and Serawak (Malaysia) with his two grandchildren, Salman and Salina. Meanwhile, Haris, Hasyim's son, preferred to live in Serawak that promised a brighter future. Haris was already married to a Malaysian woman and was rather established economically. One day Haris came home to take his father and two children to go to Serawak with him. However, Hasyim fervently declined Haris' invitation in a spirit of heroism (he fought Malaysia in 1965 confrontation) and nationalism (he fought for the country and nation regardless of any rewards in terms of better and prosperous life). Hasyim, then, decided to stay in the Indonesian border and Salman accompanied him since Hasyim was alone, poor, and ill. Haris took Salma with him to go back to Serawak instead.

From a superficial view the conflict between Hasyim and Haris can be stated to put a nostalgic and nationalistic attitude against pragmatic and realistic one. However, this film presents a more profound, subtle, and complicated positioning of each side. The setting in the film is the border area between West Kalimantan (Indonesia) and Serawak (Malaysia). Historically speaking, Indonesia and Malaysia had a long history of tension started with the *Confrontation* between 1961 and 1966 (Omar, 2010). Although the relationship was restored under the late President Suharto, the conflict between the two countries continued over territorial disputes, that is over Ligitan and Sipadan Islands, and Ambalat sea block. While this short historical survey does not emphasize on the practical political tension between the two countries over territorial disputes, it provides a background to understand Hasyim's attitude and self-positioning toward Malaysia.

Another aspect that is relevant for the discussion in relation to the construction of national identity and its representation is the borderland itself. Because the characters move in and out the border between Indonesia and Malaysia, it plays an important role on how they position themselves. Border area is actually not natural and difficult to determine as Diener

and Hagen (2010) said that “professional geographers soon concluded that all borders were arbitrary, subjective, and the result of human decisions, not forces of nature” (p. 8). Furthermore, Diener and Hagen emphasized on the cultural perspective of border and concluded that recent research viewed border “as sites of cultural interaction, exchange, and possibly hibridity” (p. 10). In this connection, Puryanti and Husain’s study (2011) on the negotiation between people and the state in a borderland of Indonesia-Malaysia in Sebatik Island is important for the discussion:

The relationship with Malaysia, for example, cannot only be viewed in terms of ‘us’ and ‘them’, as is suggested when people talk about national identity. ... It would be illusive to measure their nationalism only from their using the *ringgit* in daily life. ... a focus on borders can show how citizens relate to their nation-state in which loyalties are competing and multiple identities are managed on a daily basis, especially when there are economic disparities between two neighbouring countries like Indonesia and Malaysia in their border areas. (p. 117)

From the quotation, it is clear that someone’s identity cannot be determined easily on the surface from what one does, as is the case with Haris in the film, but he can position himself in such a way as to form multiple identities or to contain contestation of identities in himself.

Nation and National Identity

Before analyzing the representation of national identity in the film *Tanah Surga Katanya*, it is necessary to clarify the idea of nation and national identity. Anderson (2006) defined a nation as “an imagined political community” (p. 6). Furthermore, he explained that it is imagined because each member of the community has the idea that s/he belongs to a community in which most of its members very likely never meet each other. Thus, her/his membership to the community practically exists in her/his mind. The implication of this idea is that people might sometimes adhere to the idealization of the imagined community (its values, norms, rules), but at some other time they might contest it and prefer to live her/his concrete and practical daily life without necessarily complying to the idealization. This will be elucidated further in the analysis of the film in the case of Haris.

The next clarification needed is the idea of national identity which is more difficult to define. Some theorists have tried to identify the elements that construct it. For Stuart Hall,

national identity is “an example and at the same time a form of national cultural identity” (as cited in Wodak, Celia, Reisigl, and Liebhart, 2009, p. 23). Furthermore, Hall defines national culture as

a discourse--a way of constructing meanings which influence and organises both our actions and our conceptions of ourselves ... National cultures construct identities by producing meanings about ‘the nation’ with which we can *identify*; these are contained in the stories which we are told about it, memories which connect its present with its past, and imagines which are constructed of it. (ibid.)

Thus, it can be said that national identity enables people to identify with cultures of a nation through common stories, memories, and imaginings. However, the identification process might be experienced differently by members of the community since national culture is a discourse that “represents differences between social classes, between ethnic groups, or between the sexes” (ibid.).

Moreover, Kolakowski identifies five elements that characterize national identity, namely national spirit or ‘*Volksgeist*’ (expressed in collective manners of behavior), historical or collective memory, anticipation and future orientation, national body (concerning national territories, landscapes, and nature), nameable beginning (referring to the story of ‘founding fathers’ or of beginning of time) (ibid., p. 26). The relevant elements for the discussion in this paper will be the first, second, and the third ones especially in Salman’s attempt to project the image of Indonesia based on his life experiences and in the conflict experienced by Hasyim and Haris. Furthermore, Anthony D. Smith (1991) mentions that members of a community (or nation) identify themselves as a part of it since they are united in a bond through “the use of symbols - flags, coinage, anthems, uniforms, monuments and ceremonies” and thus they are “reminded of their common heritage and cultural kinship and feel strengthened and exalted by their sense of common identity and belonging” (pp. 16-17).

While it is true that national identity can be clearly represented in the use of symbols and in ceremonies, but according to Edensor (2002) it is also “grounded in the everyday, in the mundane details of social interaction, habits, routines and practical knowledge” (p. 17). What happens in daily social life does not always smoothly go in parallel with the ideals of national culture. As Edensor further said that what is called “the national” can even be “constituted and reproduced, contested and reaffirmed in everyday life” (p. 20). The analysis of the characters in the film especially Haris will elucidate this point clearly.

The Representation of National Identity in *Tanah Surga Katanya...*

The film *Tanah Surga Katanya...* (Heaven Land They Say...) represents national identity in quotidian life experiences of Indonesians who live in the borderland between Indonesia and Malaysia. The representation is done through the symbols (usage of flag and currency), ceremony (singing national songs, welcoming of the state officials), and through what the characters do (the position and choices they take) and remember (shared memory). As will be shown in the analysis, the representation contains contestation of meanings produced by the film characters.

First of all, the representation of national identity is done through the usage of red-white flag. Flag is indeed a common signifier for a national identity, but in this film the usage of flag is applied to represent contested meanings. On the one hand, red-white flag represents a spirit of pride and heroism. This is shown through the character of Hasyim and Salman. The emotional attachment to the national flag is first clearly shown in Hasyim and is passed down to Salman later on. Hasyim is the first person in the village who still owns and keeps the national flag. For Hasyim as former fighter in the conflict between Indonesia and Malaysia, the flag signifies dignity and greatness of Indonesia. Therefore, he keeps the flag in a special box as a respected symbol of that dignity and greatness, almost a *sacred* object (Fig. 1). When the local officials come to the village and for the first time the red-white flag is hoisted again after *Dwikora* operation (i.e. the confrontation era), Hasyim comes to the ceremony and stands in reverence looking up the flag from a distance (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1. Red-white flag



Fig. 2. Showing reverence to the red-white flag

Hasyim's attitude toward the flag and his memory of fighting against Malaysia is passed down to his grandson Salman who reveres it almost as sacred too. Thus, when he goes to the market in the Malaysian territory and sees an Indonesian salesperson (the second owner of red-white flag) uses the red-white flag as a mundane mat for his goods, Salman protests it strongly (Fig. 3). Later on, when Salman has succeeded to collect some money and buys two pieces of sarong (intended formerly for his grandfather Hasyim) and sees the same

salesperson, he offers one piece of sarong to the salesperson and exchanges it with the red-white flag. Salman's attitude clearly shows how he reveres the red-white flag as a representation of dignity and greatness of a national identity.



Fig. 3. Contrasting meaning construction of the national flag

Ironically, even the state elementary school (as a representation of official educational institution) in the village and the village head (as an extension of the government official) do not have the flag. The fact that the state fails to provide even one flag that is a symbol of national sovereignty and dignity and that the salesperson is ignorant and indifferrent toward the flag represents a contrasting meaning attached to the flag. In this case, the same object that symbolizes a national identity is presented to be an unimportant or irrelevant object in people's daily life. The teacher, students, and people in general forget the need or the existence of the red-white flag until the local government officials visit the school. Hence, the red-white flag is used here as the representation of national identity imbued with pride and heroism on the one hand, but on the other hand it is presented as insignificant object having no baggage of those meanings.

The next representation of national identity in this film is through the usage of currency. For dr. Anwar who replaces the late previous doctor in the village, the usage of *ringgit* in the territory of Indonesia is something beyond his imagination. He attaches national identity in the usage of currency and considers that Indonesian people who use *ringgit* in Indonesia's land is intolerable and dangerous. In dr. Anwar's opinion this is dangerous because it will make the people feel that they are not Indonesians. In this case, dr. Anwar represents superficial and ideal identification between rupiah usage and national identity. While for Lized, an Indonesian boy who helps him bring his luggages, and other people who live on the Indonesian borderland, *ringgit* is the common currency they use for daily trading practices because they rely on doing business with their Malaysian neighbors.

As Puryanti and Husain cited above has reminded that it is "illusive to measure their

nationalism only from their using the *ringgit* in daily life,” this film represents competing ideas of what it means to be Indonesian. On one side, the usage of rupiah may signify pride of being a part of Indonesia, but for the people who live in the borderland and who rely on doing business with their Malaysian neighbors, using ringgit is the only available meaningful practice since they depend on their neighbor’s more bustling area. While the students who never see rupiah may learn that they are Indonesians from their teacher Astuti, but as long as the state fails to provide proper means of living, competing and multiple identities are formed. On one side, they may realize that they are Indonesians, but on the other side they use ringgit, thus to be a *part of Malaysia*, on a daily practical basis. In this case, the national identity that is represented by this film through the use of currency shows contested meanings of being a part of Indonesia.

A further contestation of meaning in terms of national identity is represented through the ceremony of singing national song. Indonesian anthem is *Indonesia Raya* and is usually sung in official occasions like in a flag ceremony or in welcoming government officials. In this film, the students in the elementary school only know one song, that is *Kolam Susu* (Pool of Milk) telling the wealth and prosperity of Indonesia that even sticks and rocks turn to plants. This song was created and popularized by *Koes Plus*, a rock and roll band group, in 1973. It was an era of New Order rule. While indeed the song captures the believed picture of reality about the real or otherwise imagined wealth of Indonesia’s nature and becomes a collective memory, the prosperity is not enjoyed evenly by most of the people, especially those who live in the border area as presented in this film. Thus, this song may be to confirm the believed picture of reality or may be used as an irony to criticize the government for not paying enough attention to the borderland.

The image of reality presented by this film is that the village suffers from serious insufficiency of facilities. The students only know *Kolam Susu* instead of national anthem because they had forgotten it since the last teacher who taught that song was not replaced for a year and there was no replacement teacher to teach them. The awareness for the importance of singing the national anthem comes when government officials are going to visit the village. The ceremony of welcoming the officials is usually embodied in a flag ceremony and in performance by the students showing the local talents. On this occasion, Salman reads a poem presenting a counter meaning construction to the belief and ideology built in the song *Kolam Susu*. In his poem, Salman tries to provide the image of reality as he and his grandfather experience in their daily life. A comparison between the song and Salman’s poem will clarify

this point:

<i>The Song: Kolam Susu</i>	<i>Salman's Poem: Tanah Surga Katanya ...</i>
Bukan lautan hanya kolam susu	Bukan lautan hanya kolam susu .. katanya. Tapi kata kakekku, hanya orang-orang kaya yang bisa minum susu.
Kail dan jala cukup menghidupmu Tiada badai tiada topan kau temui	Kail dan jala cukup menghidupimu, Tiada badai tiada topan kautemui ... katanya. Tapi kata kakekku, ikannya diambil nelayan-nelayan asing.
Ikan dan udang menghampiri dirimu	Ikan dan udang datang menghampirimu ... katanya. Tapi kata kakekku, ssstt... ada udang di balik batu.
Orang bilang tanah kita tanah surga	Orang bilang tanah kita tanah surga ... katanya. Tapi kata dokter intel, yang punya surga cuma pejabat-pejabat.
Tongkat kayu dan batu jadi tanaman	Tongkat kayu dan batu jadi tanaman ... katanya. Tapi kata dokter intel, kayu-kayu kita dijual ke negara tetangga.
Orang bilang tanah kita tanah surga Tongkat kayu dan batu jadi tanaman	Orang bilang tanah kita tanah surga, Tongkat kayu dan batu jadi tanaman ... katanya. Tapi kata kakekku, belum semua rakyatnya sejahtera, banyak pejabat yang menjual kayu dan batu untuk membangun surganya sendiri.

Salman testifies a big gap between the image of his grandfather's nationalism and sacrifice in defending his country and the image of reality as he and his grandfather experience. Hasyim has a serious heart problem and it is very difficult to get a proper health treatment for him due to many constraints: lack of financial capability, long distance to the nearest hospital, and lack of transportation. For Salman, Indonesia as imagined in the song of *Kolam Susu* does not find its parallel in his daily life. Salman has to work hard after school and sometimes has to skip lessons to collect 400 ringgit to take his grandfather to the hospital. The only transportation tool available is a motorboat passing through the forest. The everyday fact of life that Salman experiences makes him contest the *common myth* about Indonesia as represented in the song *Kolam Susu* and construct a different meaning as represented in his poem. Salman here tries

to project a future constructed meaning of Indonesia. In other words, the imagined common myth about Indonesia as represented in the song is contested with a different projected meaning based on the quotidian reality.

The next representation of national identity in this film is carried out through what the characters do and remember. In this case, there is a contrasting presentation as shown in the choices and position that Hasyim and Haris take. As Kolakowski suggested that one element of national identity is the existence of national spirit or ‘volkgeist’ which is expressed in collective behavior especially in the moment of crisis (as cited in Wodak, Celia, Reisigl, and Liebhart, 2009, p. 25), Hasyim represents this element. Despite his poor health and financial condition, and his unmet expectation of the common myth of prosperous Indonesia, he still chooses to stay and live in the borderland in Indonesia. Even on his death, Hasyim is still proud of being Indonesian and urges Salman to be so.

Hasyim still believes in the common myth of the Indonesian prosperity as represented in the song *Kolam Susu*. This is expressed when Haris presents a different construction of meaning regarding prosperity. Haris says that Malaysia is more prosperous which is proven by the real condition he testifies himself. The portrayal of physical condition between the border area in Indonesia and the border area in Malaysia supports Haris’ construction of meaning. Even the contrast of border road shown in the film endorses this construction of meaning. The road on the side of Malaysia is well-paved whereas on the side of Indonesia is rocky road (Fig. 4). Nevertheless, although Haris insists on choosing to stay in Malaysia and becoming a Malaysian citizen by marrying a Malaysian woman, he is still emotionally attached to his Indonesian family (i.e. Hasyim and Salman). It can be seen from his expression when he hears about the death of his father, he is emotionally very disturbed and experiences a moment of loss. Thus, even though Haris positions himself politically and practically as a Malaysian and chooses to stay in Malaysia, he cannot completely sever his cultural identity as an Indonesian. In this sense, he forms multiple identities and undergoes a contestation of identities in himself.



Fig. 4. Contrasting infrastructure

Conclusion

National identity is a social construction of meaning related to the nation with which people can identify as Hall defines it. This meaning construction is not fixed once for all time, but it is a process that is going on in people's life. Furthermore, Edensor (2002) contends that what is called "the national" is "constituted and reproduced, contested and reaffirmed in everyday life" (p. 20). Moreover, Puryanti and Husain's study (2011) pays attention to the negotiation that borderland people can do in relation to "their nation-state in which loyalties are competing and multiple identities are managed on a daily basis" (p. 117). Since people who live in the borderland go in and out of the border, they may form multiples identities. This is what happens to Haris who becomes a Malaysian citizen in order to make a better life but who is still culturally attached to his family and Indonesian heritage. Moreover, from the analysis of the film, it can be concluded that the representation of national identity does not only provide a single construction of meaning.

In a word, the film *Tanah Surga Katanya ...* has been succesful in representing multiple and competing national identities and at the same time in awakening the awareness of the viewers that although Indonesia has been represented in a myth of prosperous country through the song *Kolam Susu*, yet the reality of life in the borderland presents a different picture. This film rouses the awareness that the state needs to pay more attention to them and that national identity is a construction which cannot be fossilized into a single meaning, but it involves an anticipation and future orientation which might contest the present one.

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Authors' Bionote:

- **Liem Satya Limanta** is teaching at the English Department of Petra Christian University. He is now taking his doctoral degree at the Faculty of Humanities, University of Indonesia. He got his Master's degree from Leiden University with a thesis entitled *T.S. Eliot's Misreadings of Some Mythological, Literary, and Religious Sources in The Waste Land*. His research interests include poetry and film using literary and cultural studies approach.
- **Lilawati Kurnia** teaches at German Department and Cultural Studies Master Programme at the Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia. She got her PhD at the Faculty of Humanities, UI and Her Magister Artium from Gesamthochschule Kassel, Germany. Her interest and research includes popular culture, multiculturalism, comparative literature, Batiks and translation.